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ABSTRACT

Some educational practices have contributed to the apathy of students. These include a perceptual view of behavior, the view that self-worth equals achievement, norm-referenced evaluation, and success as ability and effort. Four strategies which have the potential for allowing students to experience success from reasonable levels of effort include: (1) individual goal-setting structures that allow students to define their own criteria for success; (2) outcome-based instruction and evaluation which make it possible for slower students to experience success without having to compete with faster students; (3) attribution retraining which can help apathetic students view failure as a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability; and (4) cooperative learning activities which help students realize that personal effort can contribute to group as well as individual goals. Educators must confront the discrepancies between the actual and stated goals of education. Students have the power to choose how much effort to expend on any task. If the goal is to differentiate students according to their ability, then slower students will choose to reject school by avoiding effort. For those students who are forced to choose between rejecting schooling or rejecting their sense of self-worth, time is short. (ABL)

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What Research Says to the Teacher

ED297198

Student Apathy:

The Protection of Self-Worth

by James P. Raffini

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What Research Says to the Teacher

Student Apathy:
The Protection of Self-Worth

by James P. Raffini

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National Education Association
Washington, D.C.

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PART I. THE CAUSES OF STUDENT APATHY

Nationally, about one out of four students who enter first grade each year leaves before high school graduation (81).* In 1985 4.3 million youth between the ages of 16 and 24 had dropped out of school (68). Many of those who remain in school withdraw from academic participation. Although educational reformers seem reluctant to examine the problem, student apathy is as common as chalk dust in many of our nation's classrooms. The numbers vary from community to community. Chicago's school system, for example, reported that almost 40 percent of high school freshmen fail two or more classes (88). Paradoxically, the factors that have contributed to this waste of human potential have also produced equally large numbers of students who are doing well in school, often working alongside those who have given up. These students view schooling as a necessary and important contributor to their self-fulfillment. In short, schools are producing winners and losers, in about equal numbers (64).

Most educators take pride in their contributions to the winners; few acknowledge responsibility for the losers. With the hope of increasing the former by reducing the latter, Part I of this monograph examines some of the educational practices that have contributed to this dichotomy. Part II explores instructional strategies that can help reduce it.

There seems to be little disagreement that the majority of America's students have the potential to achieve at a level much higher than that presently observed. As one national commission reported, while most students have the potential to achieve excellence, many either choose or accept mediocrity (87). But in the rush to alleviate the problem by increasing academic requirements, few reformers consider the educational practices that have undermined the will of many students to pursue school learning. Until educators can agree on the causes of academic apathy, school failure, and nonattendance, then, solutions and recommendations are premature and diversionary.

A Perceptual View of Behavior: Self-Worth Theory

Ironically, one of the causes of apathy may be that many students are *not* willing to accept mediocrity, choosing noninvolvement and even failure

*Numbers in parentheses appearing in the text refer to the Bibliography beginning on page 28.

instead of "average" or "below average" performance. To understand this apparent contradiction, a perceptual or phenomenological view of behavior will be helpful. Perceptual psychologists like Arthur Combs believe that self-enhancement is the motive driving all human behavior (37, 38). Given personal perceptions of reality, all people strive to be the "best" they can be. Everything they do is based on the field of awareness at the instant of behaving; they believe what they do is the best thing they can do at the time. Since they behave in ways that are self-enhancing, if they thought another behavior would serve their interests better, they would adopt it. While perceptions and behavior are intractably linked, the perceptual field of awareness is constantly changing, however. As you were reading the last sentence, for example, it is unlikely that you were thinking about what you ate for breakfast. But if you reflect on the previous sentence, thoughts about breakfast may enter your field of awareness. It is this fluidity of the perceptual field that can cause a person to regret a behavior shortly after carrying it out. The regret is a signal that the perceptual field has changed from what it was at the instant of the behavior.

The most important or dominant perceptions people hold are those that relate to themselves (37). While they are motivated to behave in ways that enhance these perceptions, they also struggle desperately to protect them when the perceptions are threatened. Combs argues that the enhancement and protection of self-worth provide the foundation of all human motivation (38).

Covington (40, 41) refers to this general tendency to establish and maintain a positive self-image as the self-worth motive. His theory focuses attention on an individual's need to seek success experiences and to avoid the sense of worthlessness and social disapproval generated by failure experiences. In school, students believe that personal worth depends largely on accomplishments (43). Since middle school/junior and senior high school students see ability as the critical component for determining these accomplishments, perception of ability becomes the significant component for assessing self-worth.

According to Covington (40, 43), perceptions of high ability are a primary activator of achievement behavior. Students become motivated to succeed not only for personal and social benefits, but also because success enhances a reputation for the ability to achieve. If success becomes unlikely, Covington theorizes that the first priority is to act in ways that minimize the implication that the student lacks ability.

An analysis of self-worth theory provides both a theoretical and an empirical basis for understanding many student behaviors that, to an outsider, appear self-defeating (40). Ranging from academic apathy to setting impossibly high goals, these behaviors can be seen as strategies useful to students in their struggle to protect fragile feelings of self-worth.

The Destructive Equation: Self-Worth = Achievement

Although some might argue that other goals deserve an equally high priority, few can deny the value of academic achievement in today's society. Given this priority, students quickly learn that achievement is the major criterion for assessing school success. Many students erroneously believe that in school, self-worth is directly related to the ability to achieve—to achieve is to be of value (41, 43).

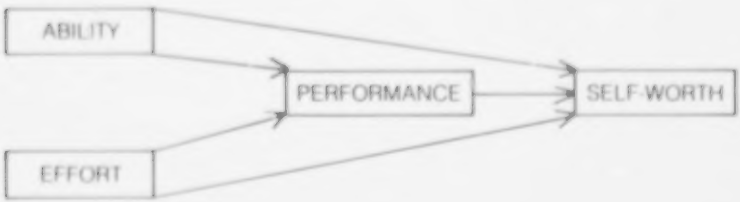

Figure 1
COVINGTON'S SELF-WORTH MODEL

Reprinted from "The Self-Worth Theory of Motivation: Findings and Implications," by Martin V. Covington, from *The Elementary School Journal*, September 1984, by permission of the University of Chicago Press. © 1984 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

Figure 1 indicates that an individual's performance level and estimates of ability and effort have a direct influence on the sense of self-worth (41). The causal relationship indicated by the direction of the arrows implies that a sense of worth depends heavily upon accomplishments. Unless people can experience success performing some valued activity, they will be deprived of a major source of self-esteem. As the diagram indicates, whether ability or effort is the primary factor in determining the performance appears not to matter; success is valued no matter how it occurs. There are, however, several exceptions to this general observation. Covington and Omelich (47), for example, have demonstrated that successes resulting from remedial assistance are sometimes less valued than those achieved solely by individual efforts. Also, feelings of inadequacy may cause some individuals to reject credit for their success fearing an inability to repeat the performance (48, 43). Despite these exceptions, evidence indicates that people typically discount information that might discredit their successful performance (14, 41, 49).

Figure 1 also demonstrates that perceptions of ability and effort can

have a direct effect on self-worth, regardless of performance. Research by Covington and Omelich indicates that by the time students reach college age, perceptions of self-worth rely heavily on perceptions of ability, and that mere perception of high ability is tantamount to a positive self-identity in school (41). Moreover, students prefer to attribute their successes to high ability rather than to high levels of effort (15, 30, 90).

Covington's theory maintains that the self-worth of students is related to their academic success. Unfortunately, this equation sentences many students to feelings of hopelessness and inferiority. The problem is not that these students are incapable of achieving. On the contrary, recent research by Bloom and others supports the conclusion that larger numbers of students are capable of achieving at levels much higher than previously assumed (19, 20). Unfortunately, by forcing students to compete against each other, schools inadvertently limit the number who can feel good about their ability to achieve. By equating self-worth with norm-referenced achievement, large numbers of students are forced to experience a significant and pervasive threat to their identity as worthwhile human beings. Many choose apathy and noninvolvement as a defense.

Overcoming the destructive implications of this equation requires courage and conviction. As Richard Beery has stated:

> The work of the educator, as I see it, is difficult. It is based on what some see as an almost heretical notion, that the personal worth of each individual is not contingent on ability, or, for that matter, on performance. Rather, each of us is valuable in our own right—and equally so. Our worth is a given, to be taken for granted, as it must be. There must be no hierarchies in personal worth. This message and the value it implies fly in the face of a very strong opposition that often comes from within individuals, from their parents, from the academic system in which they function, and from the society as a whole. Not surprisingly, therefore, the task of the educator is not easy. (15, p. 203)

Norm-Referenced Evaluation: Limiting the Winners

Almost all students enter school hoping to be successful. For some this means high grades and being on the honor roll. For others it may be a sense of self-confidence or the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Regardless of definition, few will experience pride or success if their performance is labeled "below average." Indeed, to be labeled "average" would be a disappointment for many. After all, in many states average or C performance in college would prohibit one from becoming a teacher. Unfortunately, the norm-referenced measurement and evaluation proce-

dures used by most schools make it *impossible* for large numbers of students to experience academic success (43, 96).

Norm-referenced procedures compare one student's performance with that of another. This allows for the determination of average performance, a referent that makes it possible for above- and below-average performance to exist. References to these evaluative terms are so ingrained in the educational lexicon that their continued use is unquestioned. Academic placement exams, national achievement tests, final exams, grades, and often daily quizzes depend heavily on this norm-referenced labeling. That for every student labeled above average an equal number must be labeled below average is a fact so obvious that its implications are seldom considered. It is often assumed that only the dull, lazy, or unambitious are below average; in reality, this group is made up of a fixed percentage of the population—regardless of achievement.

The use of norm-referenced competitive evaluation procedures forces 50 percent of the student population into the bottom half of their graduating classes—where few want to be. In practice the required ranking and sorting of students in this zero sum system starts much sooner. According to Benjamin Bloom, "the correlation between measures of school achievement at grade three and grade eleven is about .85, demonstrating that over this eight-year period the relative ranking of students in a class or school remains almost perfectly fixed" (21, p. 133). Allowing for few exceptions, most students conclude early in their educational experience that the reality is, once below average, always below average.

Failure to confront and question the exclusionary aspects of norm-referenced evaluation has contributed to a superficial understanding of the term "average." For example, if a local newspaper ran the headline, "Half of Ninth Graders Reading Below National Average," there might be a public outcry. The author recently asked a graduate student how she would react if her son brought home a report card stating that his reading scores were below average. Without hesitation, the mother replied, "Well, I'd grab the broomstick and take care of that problem right away!"

Some teachers assume that by determining grades from the percentage of items correct they are using criterion- rather than norm-referenced evaluation. True criterion-referenced evaluation, however, requires formative or diagnostic-progress tests designed to measure specific learning objectives. The purpose of these tests is to help ensure that each set of learning tasks is thoroughly mastered before subsequent learning tasks are started. According to Bloom, "Formative evaluation tests should be regarded as part of the learning process and should in no way be confused with the judgment of the capabilities of the student or used as part of the grading process" (21, p. 170). Percentage of items correct is only the start in a movement away from norm-referencing. Most experienced teachers know that they can design a test on which almost no student can get over

70 percent; they can also design one on which almost every student gets 100 percent. The teacher's selection of items determines whether a test is designed to discriminate between high- and low-ability students, or to measure mastery of specific learning objectives. In the first case, only a limited number of students will answer the items correctly. In the second, the goal is to obtain correct answers from all students who have mastered the content.

Standards of excellence can be identified. And it is much more humane and productive to evaluate an individual against these standards than against another's performance. By so doing teachers enable all to excel.

Success: Ability + Effort

The use of norm-referenced evaluation teaches many students that to be successful in school is to be above average. Placement into that limited group, however, requires from the student both ability and effort. In its broadest sense, academic ability is a norm-referenced trait. Given a large enough sample, the number of students with a specific level of ability is distributed in the familiar bell-shaped curve; a limited number have high ability, an equally limited number have low ability, and most have near-average ability. Effort, on the other hand, is an individually determined trait, and need not be norm-referenced. All students are capable of much or little effort; each person is the sole determinant of how much to expend on any given task.

When students enter school with their norm-referenced ability and individually determined effort, they quickly discover that they must compete with each other for a limited number of rewards—the most desirable being labeled "above average." During this competition the norm-referenced evaluation system teaches students that effort is less important in obtaining rewards than ability (4, 5). Assuming that everyone works hard, those with high ability receive the A's and B's and those with lower ability the C's and D's. (F's are usually reserved for those who do not show effort.)

There is, however, a developmental pattern in a child's conception of the relationship of effort and ability in determining outcome. Preschool and kindergarten children do not distinguish between ability and effort as separate factors in determining performance (40, 69, 89). According to Covington, these children believe that those who try hard are smart; they see effort as both an indicator of ability and synonymous with it. Only when children approach the middle-elementary years do they begin to see ability and effort as separate dimensions, although effort is still considered to be the primary causal factor in achievement (40). As competitive pressures increase, middle school/junior high and high school students no

longer see high levels of effort as a guarantee of success. Ability alone becomes a sufficient trait for high accomplishment (69).

Although high achievement is the primary determinant of teacher rewards, effort is also rewarded (23). There is evidence that students who try hard are rewarded more for success and punished less for failure than those who expend less effort (43, 48). Nevertheless, the social reinforcements of praise and encouragement for effort are largely overshadowed by the more official rewards of high grades, honor rolls, and top reading groups that are primarily distributed by norm-referenced ability. Teachers say to students that trying hard and doing their best is really what is important in school. Unfortunately, norm-referencing does not allow teachers to significantly reward all those who expend effort to do their best.

Thus, reliance on ability over effort to determine rewards results in a forced and unfair competition. It may be argued that this is simply the reality of the society in which we live, and that the school's role is to transmit the dominant culture. This view of schooling, however, is contrary to that held by many who regard schools as instruments for social change and improvement. According to cultural anthropologist Kathleen Wilcox,

> the school is a social institution upon which the culture places highly contradictory expectations. Receiving most obvious attention is the expectation that schools will maximize social equality by promoting equal opportunity; less obvious is the expectation that schools will maximize social differentiation by allocating persons to positions in a differentiated and stratified work force. (127, p. 272)

In some ways the school's evaluation system is more brutal than that of the real world. Few in the work force, for example, are subjected to the humiliation of zero sum norm-referencing. As John Gardner observes, "The top corporate executive is apt to be particularly eloquent in defense of individual competition, but his ambitious subordinates will usually find that he has himself well protected against any unseemly rivalry on their part" (63, p. 111).

Competition, in itself, is not debilitating. Many students thrive on the competition generated by our present norm-referenced evaluative structure. When students are free to choose, and when they believe they have a reasonable chance for success, competition often results in high levels of effort toward success. Since these students usually learn quicker than others—a plausible explanation for some differences in ability (32)—past experience has taught them that it is possible to become winners if they expend the necessary effort. Competition becomes debilitating, however, when it is forced on people of unequal abilities who do not have a reasonable chance of winning.

Apathy: A Failure-Avoiding Behavior

As a result of forced competition among students of unequal ability, slower students become victims of a system that can reward some only by punishing others (43). These students find themselves having to spend more time and effort to master what others do in a fraction of the time. In the earlier grades, most willingly persist since they have been led to believe that more effort will result in success. But as they move up in the grades, they learn that although their effort *does* lead to higher achievement, they still receive the lower grades since their performance is *still* below average. Eventually they realize that A's and most B's are reserved for the upper half of the students who expend similar amounts of effort but have the ability to learn more quickly. Some accept their below-average achievement and continue to expend effort. Others discover that they can find success and self-worth in extracurricular activities or in activities outside school. Still others who equate achievement with self-worth find it too painful to accept their below averageness. In desperation, they conclude that if they cannot win in this struggle, at least they can avoid losing. Rather than continuing to strive for academic success, these students now focus their effort on protecting their self-worth by seeking behavior patterns that allow them to avoid a sense of failure (40, 41, 43).

Failure, of course, is a subjective term that need not be restricted to an F. For some students, D's, C's, or even B's indicate failure. According to Covington and Beery, however, students who behave in ways to protect their self-worth are struggling to *avoid* a sense of failure rather than a failing grade (43). While it may appear contradictory, a frequent defense against a sense of academic failure is to stop trying.

In many classrooms if a student does not do an assignment, the teacher records an F or a zero in the grade book. While not an enjoyable experience, failure to do an assignment results in less threat to self-worth than would be the case if effort were expended to complete the assignment only to result in a similar grade. The author often asks students in which of two situations they would feel worse—if they failed to study for an exam and then received a D, or if they spent considerable effort studying for the exam and received a D. Most agree that failure is more painful when one expends reasonable effort to succeed. Research supports the conclusion that students experience the greatest threat to self-esteem under conditions of high effort, and least threat under conditions of low effort (42).

As Figure 1 indicated, effort is an important direct source of self-worth as well as a causal factor in achievement. But it also puts the student at risk. Since effort without success leads to humiliation and shame, Covington and Omelich have characterized effort as a "double-edged sword" (49). Their research indicates that college students believe that teachers would punish students who fail without making an effort more

than those who try. However, students of these teachers discover that although high effort results in less punishment and reduces some guilt associated with noncompliance to a work ethic, it also leads to suspicions of low ability. These suspicions are likely to trigger feelings of humiliation and shame should students not achieve success. Although low effort may reduce these feelings by protecting students from concluding that they lack ability, it also results in more punishment from the teacher. When effort leads to success, however, the data shows little conflict between student and teacher values (49).

Many parents and teachers assure students that they can fail only if they do not try. What they really mean, of course, is that those who fail have not *really* tried. It does not take long for failure-avoiding students to learn that if they have not really tried, they have not failed.

In addition to noninvolvement, students use other failure-avoiding tactics to shift the perceived causes of failure from low ability to external causes beyond their control. For example, they set unrealistically high goals for themselves. When failure occurs, as it inevitably will, perceptions of low ability are protected since so few students could have succeeded on such a difficult task. Or they procrastinate. By relying on last-minute rushes, procrastinators create the excuse of lack of time should they fail. Moreover, should they succeed despite the limited time, they create an appearance of having high ability (15).

Schools will not tolerate students who do not exert at least *some* effort. Failure to try results in being kept after school, letters home, or parent-teacher conferences. To avoid these unpleasantries, failure-avoiding students are forced to exert a minimum amount of effort, or at least feign the appearance of effort. Many learn to walk a fine line between expending enough effort to avoid teacher and parent wrath, but not so much as to risk experiencing a threat to their self-worth. As a result, they experience no clear-cut failures or successes. An outsider would likely see this behavior as the acceptance of mediocrity. The student sees it as a coping strategy to bolster a fragile sense of self-worth. From either point of view, it is a tragic waste of human potential created by an educational system that rewards some only by punishing others.

Thus, apathy is a way for many students to avoid a sense of failure. Those behaving from this motive approach each new learning experience with apprehension and fear—often masked with apathy, aloofness, or indifference. Their philosophy toward school becomes "Nothing ventured, nothing failed." Teachers and parents worry that they are unmotivated. In reality, they are highly motivated to protect their sense of self-worth. As they get older they begin to reject education completely. If they state publicly that school is a valueless, boring waste of time, then their self-worth is protected when they receive a failing grade. These students have discovered that it is less painful to reject school than to reject themselves.

PART II. STRATEGIES THAT CAN REKINDLE STUDENT EFFORT

Students have no control over how much academic ability they receive at birth. Nevertheless, Bloom argues that 90 to 95 percent of them have enough ability to master all the content objectives of the school curriculum (22). This assumes, of course, that they have enough time on task, optimum learning environments, and are willing to invest high levels of effort. The first two assumptions are controlled by educators; the last is within the student's volition. This section explores strategies that can invite apathetic students to reinvest in the learning process.

The effort students choose to expend on tasks is influenced by several factors. Drawing on Feather's version of expectancy theory, Brophy presents a model of student motivation based on the equation that *effort* = *expectancy* X *value* (25, 26). The theory hypothesizes that the amount of effort people will expend on a given task is a product of the expectations they have for being successful on the task, assuming reasonable effort, and the value they place on task completion. If either factor is missing, no effort will be expended. Brophy offers 29 suggestions to enhance student motivation (25). All, however, are based on the assumption that students believe that by investing reasonable amounts of effort on task it is possible for them to achieve substantial success. Given that most school systems rely on a norm-referenced, competitive evaluation process that restricts the number of winners, it seems unlikely that many students will meet this assumption.

Schools, it seems, are confronted with two apparently contradictory challenges: how to foster and reinforce maximum effort from all students—regardless of ability—and how to differentiate and reward those who excel. There is considerable opposition to setting aside norm-referenced evaluation. It is, however, impossible to shed the label "below average" unless there is also a willingness to eliminate the label "above average." Because they have a reasonable chance of winning, many students in the latter group thrive on grade competition and feel cheated if it is removed. For them it is the scarcity of an *A* that makes it of value.

Current reform seems to be aimed at providing greater challenges and rewards to the upper half of the student population. This is likely to result in more effort and greater output from this group. It is equally likely to intensify academic competition, producing an increased threat to the self-worth of slower students, many of whom will be forced to choose apathy as a defense. Certainly, it is unfair to *force* tortoises to race against hares. Hares will become lazy and fall asleep while tortoises will become discouraged at the impossibility of winning. Both, however, can benefit from a system that helps all participants become better runners.

If the goal is maximum performance from *all* students, the schools must provide hope to all students that increased effort *can* result in success. The following four instructional strategies have the potential for meeting this assumption.

Individual Goal-Setting

If the teacher's goal is to help students discover that reasonable effort can lead to success, then it becomes necessary to determine how students define success. According to a review by Roger Barker, Ferdinand Hoppe, a student of psychologist Kurt Lewin at the University of Berlin, initiated one of the first research studies to explore this problem (12). Hoppe presented his subjects with the simple task of hanging rings on hooks as they passed on a rapidly moving belt. He discovered that experiences of success or failure were unrelated to the actual achievements of the individual. One subject, for example, might experience success by placing five rings on the hooks while another might experience failure by placing fifteen rings correctly. Moreover, Hoppe found that the number of rings that an individual needed for success changed constantly; a performance that was considered a success at an earlier trial might be judged inadequate later. He referred to these individual self-expectations as the *level of aspiration*. He concluded that success and failure experiences were independent of actual achievement; rather, they were determined by the goals and expectations of the person at the time of the behavior.

Research by the author confirmed Hoppe's findings and examined the correlates of success in a competitive norm-referenced situation (97). Several sections of students enrolled in a graduate education course met individually with the author at the first class session and were asked to throw ten beanbags into a basket ten feet away. Before starting to throw, the students were asked to estimate how many of the beanbags they thought they could make. After throwing and then counting the number of baskets made, they were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction with their performance on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (being disappointed) to 5 (being pleased). The students were then asked to throw a second and a third time, estimating their performance before each trial and determining their satisfaction after counting their results. At the next class session the students were asked to throw once more, this time in front of the group. They were not asked to estimate their performance, but were instructed to do their best. After the completion of ten throws, the name and results for each student were placed on the chalkboard. When all students had finished throwing the beanbags, the results were placed into a frequency distribution on the chalkboard and the class was asked to help determine the median and the upper and lower quartile scores. Each student was then

given a form to rate the degree of satisfaction with his/her throw on the same five-point scale used when throwing alone.

Analysis of the data supported three conclusions. First, when throwing alone, student satisfaction ratings were significantly related to their achieving or exceeding their level of aspiration or expected performance. Second, individuals tend to raise or lower their goal (level of aspiration) relative to their past performance. For example, if a student's expected performance was three but the number of baskets exceeded this, the student usually raised the level of aspiration or goal for the next trial. If the performance fell considerably short of the goal, there was a tendency to lower aspirations for the next trial. Both findings support the results reported by Hoppe. The third finding from the study indicated that when students were throwing competitively in front of the group, their satisfaction rating was significantly related to their class rank. As expected, those in the upper half of the distribution were significantly more pleased with their performance than those in the lower half.

When individuals are free to establish their own goals, then, their level of aspiration seems to operate as a type of governing mechanism that provides protection against the possibility of repeated failure on the one hand, and against easy achievements that do not give a feeling of success, on the other. The ability to raise or lower goals relative to performance allows all individuals the opportunity to experience success. It is important to note that while individuals in the preceding studies were free to choose low goals or a "sure thing," few took this option. Apparently most find that only by risking failure can success have any real meaning (43).

In the classroom, students discover that the standards for successful performance are usually related to group norms or are set by the teacher. These external standards inadvertently produce a breakdown of the protective aspects of the level of aspiration. In competitive situations satisfaction becomes a function of class rank or meeting teachers' expectations rather than achieving one's goals (4, 5, 97). When the goal-setting process becomes a part of a norm-referenced environment, however, success-oriented students learn to set realistic goals. As a result of their confidence in their ability to achieve, they are willing to risk the possibility of failure. Students motivated to avoid failure, however, avoid this risk by selecting unrealistically high or low goals (43, 124, 99, 100). Covington reports that for many students competitive structures contribute to unrealistic goal-setting by pressuring them to overestimate their performance (40). Rather than establishing a realistic standard for their success, their motive apparently becomes focused on outperforming their peers (41). This tactic ensures the likelihood of further failure for most students. Research offers evidence that these goal-setting deficiencies are caused by students' disregard for information about their past performance (4).

In an extensive review of both laboratory and field studies on the effects

of goal-setting on task performance, Locke and his colleagues concluded that in about 90 percent of the studies analyzed, specific and challenging goals led to higher performance than did vague goals (85). Although their review drew heavily on business and management data where goals are typically assigned rather than self-selected, the authors found that goal-setting is most likely to improve task performance by directing attention, mobilizing effort, and increasing persistence.

The effects of goal-setting on academic achievement in classroom settings have been studied by several researchers (78, 77, 31, 61, 62). Many of these studies relied on the use of individual goal-setting conferences between teachers and students. Klausmeier and his associates reported that the results of such conferences were "truly impressive" (78, p. 1). Research sponsored by the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning indicated that children achieved more in mathematics, reading vocabulary, and word attack skills after the goal-setting conferences were held than before, and this high achievement continued even after the conferences were discontinued (94). Further research supported by the Center found that when adults who were not certified teachers encouraged children to read independently during weekly ten-minute conferences, the children's independent reading increased from four books in eight weeks to fourteen books in the same period (101).

Gaa reported that students who set goals and predicted future performance scores attained higher levels of performance than did those who did not set performance goals (61, 62). His research indicated that both elementary and secondary students who participated in individual goal-setting conferences displayed significantly higher achievement than did nongoal-setting students.

Klausmeier and his associates have offered a detailed procedure for helping teachers conduct goal-setting conferences (78). These researchers warn, however, that although such conferences are easy to plan and carry out in classrooms that are already individualizing instruction, time and structural constraints in traditional classrooms are likely to frustrate attempts to initiate them. Cognizant of this warning, the reader may find the following suggestions for conducting goal-setting conferences useful:

1. Help students concentrate on a single goal for a short period of time so that they can measure their progress and maintain interest.
2. Encourage students to state their goals clearly so that each knows exactly what must be done.
3. Although the teacher may provide many possible objectives, the students should select the ones they choose to work toward and attain by a certain time.
4. While reaching short-term goals is important, learning self-directedness and prosocial behavior is a long-term process. (78)

One of the clearest examples of applying a goal-setting structure to a traditionally competitive procedure is with the use of spelldowns. Usually this technique is a highly competitive norm-referenced experience. Nevertheless, it can provide positive reinforcement and encourage high levels of effort from good spellers. The detrimental effect occurs when all students are *forced* to compete against each other. The author recalls a teacher who complained to him that one of her fifth graders would not participate in her weekly spelldown. While the rest of the class lined up against the wall in preparation, this student always announced loudly to his classmates that he was going to spell the first word wrong. It would be difficult to find a clearer example of failure-avoidance behavior. First, the student has guaranteed that he will be successful—he *could* spell the first word wrong. Second, although he experienced the teacher's wrath, he has satisfactorily protected his self-worth by ensuring that no one in the class will know anything about his true spelling ability. The teacher occasionally tried to get the student to participate by giving him an easy word to spell like "cat" or "dog." Even then, he misspelled the word. After all, he likely reasoned, why change the game when I'm already winning?

Richard de Charms reports a few changes in this traditional spelling bee that can reduce the negative effects of competition and encourage realistic goal-setting by the participants (52, 53). Devised by teachers participating in one of his Origin Training Workshops, their new spelling bee allows students to choose between easy, moderately hard, or hard words at each turn. The class is divided into two teams with each member contributing to the group score at his or her level of ability. While several versions are possible, the typical design was to allow students to take a pretest on the words to be learned that week. After allowing time for practice during the earlier part of the week, the students would begin the game by dividing into two teams. The teacher then called on each team member, asking if the student would like to try an easy word for one point, a moderately difficult word for two points, or a hard word for three points. Since the teacher had each student's original pretest in hand, the difficulty of the words could be scaled to each student's ability. An easy word was one the student had spelled correctly on the pretest, a moderately difficult word was one the student had spelled incorrectly on the pretest but had had time to study, and a hard word was one from an unseen future spelling list tailored to the student's spelling level.

While the team members could consult with each other over the point value needed, each student made his or her own choice. By keeping a folder for each student, the teacher could develop a file of words at each level over the course of the semester. De Charms reports that the spelling game was well liked by both teachers and students. Furthermore, the students increased their effort in spelling and learned to make realistic choices (52, 53).

Giving students choices whenever possible is a clear and simple way for teachers to encourage individual goal-setting strategies. The choices may range from where to put one's name on assignments, to asking students questions like, "How many problems can you finish by tomorrow morning?" Rather than telling students to do the first five of the twenty practice problems, for example, it may be helpful to let them choose any five. (Some will do ten or fifteen in order to find the five easiest). Or, rather than assign the odd problems, students can learn to make choices by being allowed to select odd *or* even ones. When faced with these choices, students must make a commitment; this commitment can lead to responsible, goal-directed behavior.

Outcome-Based Instruction and Evaluation

Outcome or mastery-based instructional systems replace norm-referenced standards with standards of absolute performance on clearly stated instructional objectives. By viewing differences in student ability as primarily differences in the amount of time required to master objectives, it may be possible for 95 percent of students to achieve success from reasonable effort (22). With the exception of individual tutoring, it is difficult to imagine any other approach to instruction having more potential for reducing student apathy.

In 1963 John Carroll wrote a landmark article in which he proposed that students will succeed in learning a task to the extent that they are able or willing to spend the amount of time necessary (32). Carroll defined time on task not as exposure or elapsed time, but rather the amount of time the student spent actually engaged with the learning process. Implicit in his formulation was the assumption that given enough time on task, most students can conceivably attain mastery of all the school's curriculum. Carroll's view flies in the face of the traditionally held belief that aptitude or ability determines the *level* of a given subject that students can learn—that those with high ability can learn the complexities, while those with low ability can only memorize the rudimentary elements. Traditionally, learners are seen as either bright or dull. Carroll proposed that they be viewed as fast or slow.

Research by Bloom offers support for Carroll's hypothesis. His data shows that faster students initially learn from five to seven times quicker than their slower peers (22). Bloom also found that these differences are somewhat decreased after slower students are repeatedly exposed to a teach-test-reteach-retest instructional cycle.

In its traditional form, mastery instruction is usually designed around the following nine steps (1, 17, 22, 65):

1. The teacher establishes instructional objectives based on the course content and desired skills. These objectives are designed to reflect exactly what all students should learn, and should be important enough to require that all students master them.
2. Two- to three-week instructional units are designed around the course objectives.
3. Whole-group instruction is used for teaching the units.
4. Formative tests determine who needs enrichment and who needs additional instruction and more time on task. These tests are part of the learning process and are not to be used for grading.
5. Students who have attained mastery of the objectives are provided with enrichment activities or "extensions."
6. Additional instruction or "correctives" are provided to those students who did not achieve mastery.
7. A second, parallel formative test is given to those who did not achieve mastery the first time.
8. All students move on to the next instructional unit and repeat the cycle.
9. Periodic criterion-referenced summative tests are used to determine grades.

According to Guskey, the two most essential elements in the mastery learning process are the feedback and corrective dimension and a congruence among the various components (65, 66, 67). To satisfy the first element, Guskey believes that students need to be given information about their learning at regular intervals throughout the instructional process. This feedback is essential to determine what they have learned well and what objectives require more time and effort. For students having difficulty, correctives provide an instructional alternative to the initial teaching. By presenting the material in a different way, the student avoids repeating the previously unsuccessful instructional process. Through this feedback and corrective procedure, mastery learning provides for individualization within a group instructional model (65).

Congruence among instructional components, the second essential element of mastery learning, requires that the teacher maintain a consistency among the learning objectives, the method of instruction, the feedback and correctives, and the evaluation. Students should not have to outguess the teacher in determining what is important to learn, nor should they be surprised by test items in the evaluation component. This consistency among objectives, instruction, and evaluation defines student expectations and instructional outcomes, making it possible to determine when the instruction has been effective.

Educators need to be cognizant of the fact that when traditional, norm-referenced competitive procedures are replaced with differential amounts of

time on task and quality instruction, student grades increase. Although some may be concerned about the negative aspects of this "grade inflation," it is difficult to imagine achievement inflation without it. As Bloom reports, "The typical result of mastery learning studies in the schools is that about 80 percent of students reach the same final criteria of achievement (usually A or B+) as approximately the top 20 percent of the class under control group instruction" (21, p. 134).

In a review of 40 rigorous studies of student outcomes under mastery and nonmastery approaches to instruction, Block found that mastery students learn more *effectively* and more *efficiently* than their nonmastery counterparts (17). Measuring learning in terms of student achievement or retention, mastery students almost always learn more, and several times faster, than nonmastery students (17). As for the effects of mastery learning on student apathy, Block reported that mastery-taught students liked their learning, their teaching, and themselves better than did their nonmastery-taught peers. These students almost always responded more positively than did nonmastery students on measures of subject matter interest, attitude toward subject matter, self-concept (academic as well as general), academic self-confidence, and attitude toward instruction (17).

Chandler's review of 97 research studies comparing achievement of mastery and nonmastery students supported Block's conclusions (33). In addition, however, Chandler discovered that a student at the 50th percentile in a nonmastery group could expect to achieve at the 80th percentile using a mastery approach (33).

Outcome-based learning is not a panacea. It requires more creativity, flexibility, and effort from teachers than traditional instructional systems. Since the procedure is designed around instructional objectives, without teacher creativity and flexibility these objectives can easily become sterile, mundane, and isolated facts to be memorized. Providing for correctives and extensions requires organization and support. Another limitation, according to Cohen, is that many schools do not have a curriculum designed for a student's continuous progress. He believes that many educators distort mastery learning by trying to force it—like a square peg in a round hole—to conform to a traditional time-based and assignment-driven curriculum (35).

Moreover, implementing outcome-based learning on a systemwide basis requires the continuous support of educational leaders. After monitoring over 300 mastery learning projects, Cohen reported that only 60 percent were successful. He concluded that "in about 96 percent of the failures, the problem was a principal who would not take responsibility for the curriculum or who would not lead the teaching staff" (35, p. 37).

Even without school or systemwide leadership, however, teachers can still reduce student apathy by implementing specific aspects of the mastery learning model. Covington and his colleagues conducted a rather compli-

cated analysis of two major components of mastery learning (40). The first involved a criterion-referenced grading arrangement that established absolute performance standards for each grade. This eliminates norm-referenced competition since any number of students can receive a high grade if they exceed the performance criterion. The second component was a test-retest that allowed students to attain the criterion. These researchers believed that this procedure would strengthen the causal linkage between effort and performance and should lead to higher achievement.

Accordingly, students in a large introductory psychology course at the University of California, Berkeley, were randomly assigned to either criterion-referenced or norm-referenced grading and to a traditional one-try exam sequence or a two-try sequence that allowed them to take a second parallel form of exam with no penalty. Student attitudes and beliefs toward several motivational dimensions were also measured.

As might be expected from previous research, the analysis of the data indicated that students in the mastery system scored significantly higher on test performance and on all the motivational measures than did their counterparts. It was also discovered, however, that the performance superiority depended entirely on the presence of multiple test opportunities. Furthermore, these performance gains led in turn to increased aspirations and confidence. The researchers found that by increasing the amount of effort expended by mastery students, the retesting option enhanced motivational factors and contributed directly to increased future test performance. Apparently a retest option sets up an effort-outcome linkage that suppresses the ability-outcome linkage that undermines self-worth and contributes to student apathy (40). In addition, despite many initial failures, most mastery students eventually succeeded in reaching their personal grade goals through persistent study and second test-taking.

Some may be concerned that reducing grade competition might rob achievement of its incentive value. The data from the Berkeley study suggests that the value of noteworthy performances did not decrease even though the number of these performances was more frequent. Competition still exists in a mastery system, but it shifts from the peer group to the standards of the instructor (40).

Covington's research has significant implications for classroom teachers. The apparently simple procedure of setting criterion-referenced grading standards and then allowing students to retake parallel forms of classroom tests, without penalty, can help alleviate student apathy. Such a procedure could also serve as a temporary measure while a broader-based mastery system is being developed. Increases in achievement should, however, be followed by changes in the traditional norm-referenced grade distribution. If teachers are forced to differentiate students by artificially restricting the number of A's and B's, then the academic apathy of many students must be a necessary by-product.

Attribution Retraining

Assume that as a teacher you return to your classroom after a short absence to find a beautifully wrapped box of candy on your desk with a note indicating that it is from a group of your students. Try to imagine your response or feeling. Although individuals are usually pleased whenever they receive a present, the characteristics of their feelings usually depend on what they believe to be the cause of the present. Did you receive the candy because the students had not studied for the test you had planned and were hoping to persuade you to postpone it? Did you receive it because the students felt guilty that your pet gerbil ran away when they were using it as a football during recess? What if you received the candy because the students missed you and wanted you to know that they appreciated you as their teacher? In each of these situations you would most likely have a different response and experience different feelings.

Psychologist Bernard Weiner proposed that people's feelings and reactions to an event are closely related to what they attribute to be the cause of the event (123, 124). Weiner was primarily concerned with reactions to success and failure. According to his *Attribution Theory*, four causes (or attributes) are usually given for these experiences: (1) personal ability or natural aptitude, (2) the amount of effort expended, (3) the difficulty of the task, and (4) luck. These causal elements can be further classified into three dimensions:

1. *The locus of control*, or the degree to which a cause for the behavior is inherent in the person or the result of external events. Ability and effort are considered internal because they originate within the person, whereas task difficulty and luck are external because they are caused by outside factors.
2. *The stability of the attribute over time*, or whether one can depend on performing the same task again. Ability and task difficulty are considered stable, whereas effort and luck are considered unstable.
3. *The controllability of the attribute*. Effort is the only attribute within a person's personal control.

Feelings are generated from attributions; the most positive attribute for successful performance of a task is high ability. Since ability is internal, it generates pride; since it is stable, it generates confidence. Effort is also a positive attribute for success. Since it is internal and controllable, it inspires pride; but because effort is unstable, the feelings of confidence are not as strong. Because both luck and task difficulty are external, attributing success to these causes may produce feelings of indifference or surprise.

Attributing failure to lack of ability generates feelings of shame and hopelessness. Since ability is internal, no one else can be blamed; since it is stable and uncontrollable, this means it may be lacking the next time the

task is attempted. As discussed in Part I, failure-avoiding students protect their self-worth by attributing failure to causes other than ability.

Attribution Theory has several immediate implications for educators. First, the more teachers ask students to work harder on a task at which they do not succeed, the more students are forced to conclude that they lack ability. To avoid the sense of hopelessness resulting from this conclusion, teachers must match educational tasks to student ability. Only then can effort lead to success. Task analysis procedures enable teachers to divide complicated relationships and skills into easier managed subdivisions. As Montessori discovered long ago, a child should never be allowed to fail until he or she has had a reasonable chance for success.

Another recommendation from Attribution Theory is to avoid telling students that the task they are being asked to perform is easy. Teachers attempting to encourage apathetic students often overlook this caution. Since task ease is an external factor, success at an easy task will result in feelings of indifference. Furthermore, students who fail at an easy task experience feelings of shame and embarrassment, and may be forced to conclude that they lack even minimal levels of ability. Telling students that a task is difficult, but with reasonable effort, an internal and controllable factor, they can be successful, increases the possibility for feelings of pride and confidence. Similarly, wishing students "good luck" on a task generates an external and uncontrollable attribute for success and may result in feelings of indifference. Wishing students "good effort" may be more productive.

To the frustration of many teachers, failure-avoiding students are largely unresponsive to success experiences (43). They tend to ascribe their occasional successes to external factors such as lucky guessing, help from others, or an easy task (126). As previously mentioned, the use of mastery or outcome-based instructional procedures allows students to learn from their mistakes. Failure-avoiding students, however, may not benefit from these procedures because they avoid realistically examining the causes of their failure. Through attribution retraining these students can be helped to change their view of the cause of failure from the uncontrollable attributes of lack of ability, luck, and task difficulty to the only controllable attribute—effort.

Research has demonstrated that students who are helped to change their maladaptive attributional perceptions of success and failure can improve their motivation, involvement, and achievement (36, 57, 13, 7). In a review of attribution retraining studies, Licht found that teaching children to attribute their failures to insufficient effort resulted in increases in persistence and performance when the children were confronted with difficult tasks (84). Those given equivalent amounts of practice but not receiving the attribution retraining showed no subsequent improvements in their response to failure (35, 57, 84). Consequently, Licht concluded that

"children who have developed a maladaptive pattern of causal attributions will need more than just success experience to build their confidence and alter the way they respond when they confront difficulty" (84, p. 484).

Failure-avoiding students need help in realizing that failure is the result of insufficient effort rather than the lack of ability. Therefore an important component of attribution retraining is providing students with feedback that supports effort-oriented causes for success. Teachers' verbal comments are essential to this process and should include informational feedback to students concerning their effort. For example, "The additional time and effort you have devoted to math has helped improve your computation skills," or "The extra effort you have put into your reading has made a real difference in your speed and comprehension."

By focusing on the attributes for success and failure, teachers can help apathetic students realize that increased effort can lead to success. This may require a reexamination of goals or a restructuring of the task, but in order to reduce apathy, students must be helped to change their erroneous belief that effort creates a threat to self-worth. In most cases this will mean that teachers must restructure the learning environment to guarantee the student that success is possible from increased effort. It will also mean that both teacher and student must have a similar definition of success.

Because they are formed through feedback from thousands of experiences, failure identities are difficult to change. To move students from hopelessness to hope requires more than one high grade. In fact, teachers need to provide students with *many* effort-outcome feedback experiences. Ames and Felker report that cooperative goal structures can help provide these experiences (5). The following section examines the characteristics of cooperative learning environments.

Cooperative Learning

A fourth strategy for inviting apathetic students back to the learning process is through the use of cooperative learning activities. The term *cooperative learning* refers to a variety of instructional methods in which students of different achievement levels work together in groups of from two to five members. The use of small-group instruction is obviously not new to most teachers. What is new is the systematic application of certain cooperative strategies that have been found to increase student achievement while also increasing the sense of self-esteem (71, 113, 108). David and Roger Johnson and their colleagues at the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota and Robert Slavin and his associates at Johns Hopkins University have been working independently to define the nature of these strategies and to conduct research on their effectiveness.

Slavin's research has established that two conditions are necessary for

cooperative learning to have a substantial impact on student achievement: (1) there must be a clearly defined group goal for students to work toward, and (2) success in reaching this goal must depend on the individual learning of all group members (104, 106, 108). According to Slavin, "Simply putting students into mixed ability groups and encouraging them to work together are not enough to produce learning gains: students must have a reason to take one another's achievement seriously, to provide one another with the elaborate explanations that are critical to the achievement effects of cooperative learning" (104, p. 9). Slavin's basic model of student team learning assigns students to four- or five-member teams made up of high, average, and low performers. The teacher then presents a lesson followed by team study of worksheets designed for group mastery. Following the team practice, students take independent quizzes on the material. In addition to these individual scores, team scores are computed on the basis of each member's improvement. Recognition is provided to high-scoring teams through a class newsletter or bulletin board (105).

The Johnsons provide a similar group of strategies that can be used in any subject area with students of any age (72, 73, 24). Their model is based on five major elements:

1. Teachers must develop *positive interdependence* among students. This requires that students view the learning situation with a "we-are-all-in-this-together, sink-or-swim" orientation; and that the learning task be structured so that one student cannot succeed unless all do. Through this process, group members share an identity based on team membership, striving for mutual benefit, and sharing a common fate.
2. Ample amounts of *face-to-face interaction* among students, including oral elaboration and summary of the material being learned, are essential. An important purpose of these discussions is to help students find personal meaning in the material by tying it to previous learning.
3. Students are *individually accountable* for their behavior. Activities must be designed so that each group member pulls his or her own weight. Cooperative learning groups cannot tolerate "slackers" or "hitchhikers" who let others do all the work.
4. Students need to be taught to use *collaborative skills*. The Johnsons believe that the systematic teaching of leadership, communication, and conflict resolution skills is a necessary part of implementing cooperative learning groups.
5. This element deals with *group processing*. Periodically the groups need to assess how well they are working together and meeting each other's needs. The goal is to examine ways to improve relationships among members.

A substantial amount of research has determined that when cooperative learning methods provide for group goals and individual accountability, the effects on student achievement are remarkably consistent. Of 38 research studies reviewed by Slavin that compared cooperative methods to traditional control methods, 33 reported significantly greater achievement for the cooperatively taught classes and 5 found no significant differences (104). A synthesis of research on cooperative learning strategies by Joyce and his colleagues revealed that on content-specific standardized tests the cooperative learning models generated an average effect size greater than one standard deviation. The average student in cooperative learning groups performed above the 90th percentile student in the control group (76). These researchers also found that cooperative environments have substantial effects (one or two standard deviations) on increasing feelings of empathy for others, reducing intergroup tensions and antisocial behavior, and increasing positive feelings toward others. They conclude: "Research on cooperative learning is overwhelmingly positive and the cooperative approaches are appropriate for all curriculum areas" (76, p. 17).

Slavin's review of the research on the effects of cooperative learning on noncognitive outcomes is useful for assessing the value of cooperative learning for reducing student apathy. He concluded:

> In summary, cooperative learning has been shown in a large number and wide variety of studies to positively influence a host of cognitive and noncognitive variables. . . . The overall effects of cooperative learning on student cooperation, mutual concern, race relations and relations with mainstreamed students, liking of school, self-esteem, and internal locus of control are positive and robust. (109, p. 362)

Integrating cooperative learning groups into traditional classrooms is not an easy task. Students are accustomed to working alone and are likely to maintain a competitive orientation when teachers begin such groups. The Johnsons offer several suggestions to teachers for reducing frictions in the transition from traditional to cooperative learning (72). Their first suggestion is to start small. By not rushing the process, teachers can work cooperative learning groups into the curriculum. They further suggest that teachers keep in mind that the students who are most difficult to integrate into groups are often those most in need of peer support. When problems of student apathy arise, the teacher may want to encourage group members to discuss the problem with the student. By encouraging the student to share the reasons for his/her refusal to become involved in the process, the group may find a way to facilitate increased involvement. The teacher can also help by trying to include supportive and encouraging classmates in the groups with the most apathetic students. Since low-achieving students tend to achieve at higher levels when they are members of cooperative learning groups, the teacher and peers can highlight this higher achievement in the

hope of enhancing the self-esteem of all group members. Only through such positive encouragement will failure-avoiding students risk expending effort to succeed. The total group effort, however, makes it possible for each member to experience success. While focusing on academic achievement, cooperative learning groups also foster a sense of belongingness in their members, which in turn serves to promote higher levels of self-esteem (86). According to McDaniel, "When students learn the joy of working productively together toward commons goals, motivation inevitably improves" (86, p. 47).

CONCLUSION

While many view apathy as a deficiency in students, this analysis has focused on the factors inherent in traditional educational paradigms that contribute to the belief of many students that high levels of effort on academic tasks are unlikely to lead to academic success. Furthermore, by equating academic success with self-worth, many students have discovered that they can reduce feelings of failure by eliminating effort on academic pursuits. Four strategies that have the potential for allowing students to experience success from reasonable levels of effort were explored:

1. Individual goal-setting structures allow students to define their own criteria for success.
2. Outcome-based instruction and evaluation make it possible for slower students to experience success without having to compete with faster students.
3. Attribution retraining can help apathetic students view failure as a lack of effort rather than a lack of ability.
4. Cooperative learning activities help students realize that personal effort can contribute to group as well as individual goals.

As educators, we must confront the discrepancies between the actual and stated goals of education. Students have the power to choose how much effort to expend on any task. If our goal is to differentiate students according to their ability, then slower students will choose to reject school by avoiding effort. To prevent academic apathy, we must confront the challenge offered by John Gardner more than two decades ago:

> How can we provide opportunities and rewards for individuals of every degree of ability so that individuals at every level will realize their full potentialities, perform at their best and harbor no resentment toward any other level? (63, p. 115)

For those students who are forced to choose between rejecting schooling or rejecting their sense of self-worth, time is short.

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